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Nayland Blake

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

The Nayland Blake piece that almost always comes to mind first when I think of him is a video from 2000, *Starting Over*, in which he struggles to perform a kind of disco scenario while wearing a bulky, heavy white bunny suit. (Blake is a big man; the bunny suit is bigger.) That, and *Feeder 2*, a walk-in-scale cabin from 1998, made of steel and gingerbread. Both are works of unbalanced heft and mass, dealing with size, appetite, and desire. But there's another side to Blake's art, delicate and miniature, and this show of drawings and wall- and floor-based sculptures fell firmly into that second group.

The sculptures, dating from 2003 to 2008, were constructed of motley materials, a basically derelict miscellany apparently scavenged by Blake on walks through the city. Yet there was precision and care in their conception, beginning with the installation: on one wall, three small, skeletal works of hanging wire, string, jewelry-type chain, and beady bits and pieces; on the second, a more physically substantial group using plywood, plexi, and other scraps; and on the third, a single, larger piece made of battered plastic bottles. The drawings filled a fourth wall; two similarly designed freestanding pieces, of found furniture supporting erect, flagpolelike members, dotted the floor; and in the entryway hung a pair of editioned pieces, aluminum cutouts respectively showing Blake's signature bunny, here suspended peculiarly, as if lynched, and a handsome star that became worrying given its rhyme with the stars in a Confederate flag barely visible in the metal. (It is worth knowing here that Blake is partly of African-American descent.) Finally, a structural column in the center of the main room supported a group of paintinglike objects made of plywood and scratched and colored plexi.

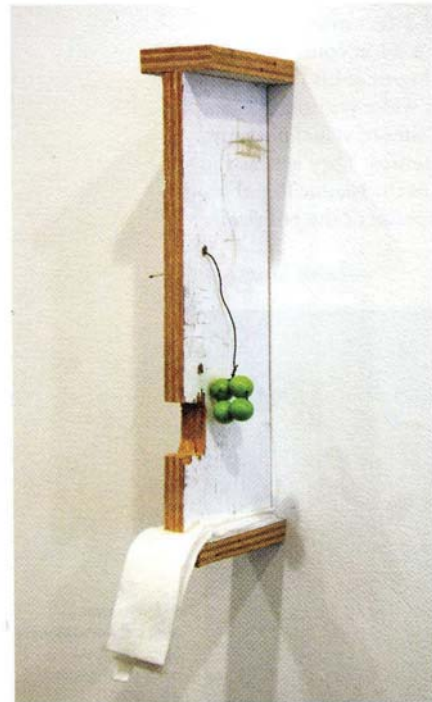
My first thought was to see these works in mainly formal terms. It was as if Blake had read Richard Serra's well-known "Verb List" of 1967-68—a list of actions and qualities producing sculptural results—and set out to calculate some wry additions to that virile roster: to dangle, to squeeze, to droop, perhaps. For the sculpture enacted a kind

of catalogue of relations among mutually supporting objects, ranging from the pinching of tongues of white felt between wooden stays to the poking of wooden skewers into a block of ply to the resting of a drawer on a triangular shelf that Blake might have lifted from Haim Steinbach. The "paintings," too, read like responses to a century-old debate on the nature of the painting as object. These ontological issues, though, were embodied in vernacular, associative stuffs remote from formalist concerns: sequins, key labels, feathers, pipe cleaners, buttons, perhaps a plastic toothbrushholder. Particularly in the wiry works, which distinctly evoked Richard Tuttle, Blake seemed to be both deploying a sculptural vocabulary and exploding it through worldly references unfamiliar to it.

Meanwhile, the hanging curves of the wire and string pieces followed just the same

construction principle as the catenaries of Jasper Johns, Blake's companion at the Matthew Marks Gallery. And that drawer on that shelf, topped by a spool, a spindle, and another empty pop bottle, was the holder for two wooden balls, of the kind you might roll in your hands, like Captain Queeg—a possible reference to Johns's *Painting with Two Balls*, of 1960. These are speculations, I quickly add, but, even had Blake not had those works in mind, if Johns's catenaries and spheres are subject to sexual decoding, so are his. In fact these pieces, with their recuperation of the unvalued, their play of stiff and soft, rigid and limp, stuffed and empty, and their tinselly, glittery loveliness, virtually call out for it. And so we are back once again to appetite and desire.

—David Frankel



Nayland Blake,
Untitled, 2007,
 painted wood, felt,
 wire, and glass beads.
 18½ x 2½ x 6".